



\$2.99 #16

# Nodwick™



Nodwick

BY AARON WILLIAMS

# Running the Gauntlet

FROM ARTAX'S JOURNAL: IT HAS BEEN AN ODD FEW MONTHS SINCE YEAGAR WON THE TOURNAMENT AND GAINED HIS MAGICAL GAUNTLET. FOR ONE, WE DIDN'T REALIZE THAT A KINGDOM CAME WITH IT.

NOT THAT HE WOULD HAVE NEEDED TO BE CROWNED, MIND YOU. AFTER ALL, HE DOES HAVE THE GAUNTLET AND ALL THE POWERS THAT COME WITH IT.

FOR STARTERS, NO ONE CAN DISOBEY HIS EVERY WHIM WHEN HE'S AROUND. HE APPOINTED ME 'COURT MAGICIAN,' AND I CAN'T TELL IF I ACCEPTED BECAUSE I WANTED TO OR IF THE GAUNTLET COMPELLED ME TO.

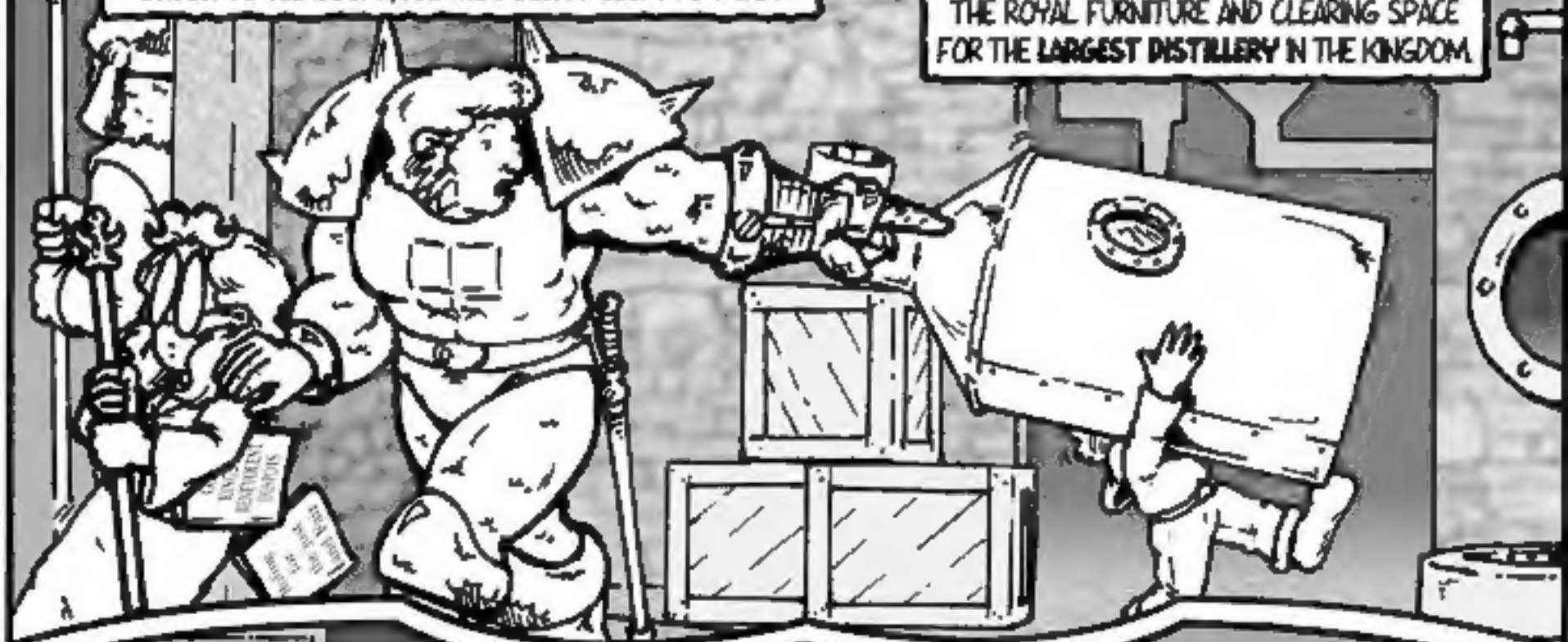
THE GAUNTLET IS AN IMPRESSIVE ARTIFACT. NO BLOW CAN LAND ON YEAGAR WHILE HE WEARS IT, AND HE CAN SEND ELDRITCH ENERGIES FROM IT WITH DEVASTATING EFFECT.





PIFFANY HAS MADE HERSELF THE LIAISON FROM HER CLERICAL ORDER TO HIS COURT, AND HE DOESN'T SEEM TO MIND.

NODWICK HAS BEEN KEPT BUSY REARRANGING THE ROYAL FURNITURE AND CLEARING SPACE FOR THE LARGEST DISTILLERY IN THE KINGDOM.



I WRITE THESE WORDS SO THAT I MIGHT HAVE A RECORD OF MY THOUGHTS WHEN NOT UNDER KING YEAGAR'S INFLUENCE. I'VE SCoured THE ROYAL LIBRARIES, AND I'VE DISCOVERED SOME DISTURBING THINGS ABOUT THE METAL GLOVE HE WEARS.

I ONLY HOPE I CAN ACT ON THIS KNOWLEDGE BEFORE I'M 'CONVINCED' TO DO OTHERWISE...

HEY, ART! WHAT'S SHAKING?



OH! UM, NOT MUCH, YOUR MAJESTY.

HAH, FORGET THAT "YOUR MAJESTY" STUFF. WHAT'RE YOU LOOKING UP?



MAGICAL ARTIFACTS...

TO BE SPECIFIC, YOUR GAUNTLET—



YEAH, ISN'T IT GREAT? I THINK I'VE LEARNED ENOUGH ABOUT IT TO EFFECTIVELY LEAD MY ARMY.



ARMY? WHAT ARMY?







THE NEXT MORNING...

I'VE NEVER HAD BREAKFAST ON A TOWER BEFORE. IT'S SO LOVELY UP HERE. THANK YOU FOR INVITING US, ARTAXI!

IT'S CERTAINLY BETTER THAN THE FOOD I GET IN THE SERVANTS' QUARTERS.

THAT'S NOT THE REASON I CALLED THIS MEETING...

YEAGAR IS OUT FIGHTING THE ANSERINIANS. I DON'T KNOW WHY. HE THINKS THERE'S TROUBLE ON THE BORDER, BUT I'VE HEARD NO REPORTS OF IT. NO ONE HAS.

HE'S BEEN AVOIDING ME FOR WEEKS. I CAN'T SEEM TO PIGEONHOLE HIM UNLESS I CALL UPON THE GODS FOR HELP. AND EVEN THEN, I CAN'T STAY IF HE TELLS ME TO GO. IT'S REALLY WEIRD.

HE'S GETTING IRRATIONAL. I MEAN, NOT HIS USUAL IRRATIONAL. I'VE NOTICED SERVANTS THAT MAKE MISTAKES TEND TO GO MISSING. HE'S BEEN BLOWING UP AT PEOPLE FOR NO REASON, TOO. AND THE DISTILLERY HE'S GOT ME WORKING ON, IT LOOKS A LOT LIKE A TEMPLE OF SOME KIND...

I'VE FOUND SOME INFORMATION ABOUT THAT GLOVE OF HIS. IT'S MENTIONED IN SEVERAL HISTORIES AND LEGENDS, ALWAYS BEFORE A TIME OF GREAT TURMOIL AND CHAOS.

IT ALSO MENTIONS DOOM FOR ITS WELDER.

IT'S TOO BAD THE GUY WHO PROBABLY KNEW THE MOST ABOUT IT IS DEAD. KING WHAT-HIS NAME.







OH, IT'S YOU. YOU'RE FRIENDS WITH THAT LUMMOX WHO WON THE TOURNEY, EH? I'M AMAZED YOU'RE STILL ALIVE. HE MUST TRULY VALUE YOUR LIVES.

WHAT DID YOU PUT ON OUR FRIEND'S HAND?



I GAVE HIM THE GAUNTLET OF SUPREMACY. IT ALLOWS HIM TO BE INVINCIBLE IN BATTLE, COMMAND ANY MORTAL MIND, AND GOVERN WITH ULTIMATE AUTHORITY.



IT'LL ALSO DRIVE HIM MAD, WHICH WILL PROBABLY BE VERY BAD FOR LOCAL PROPERTY VALUES.

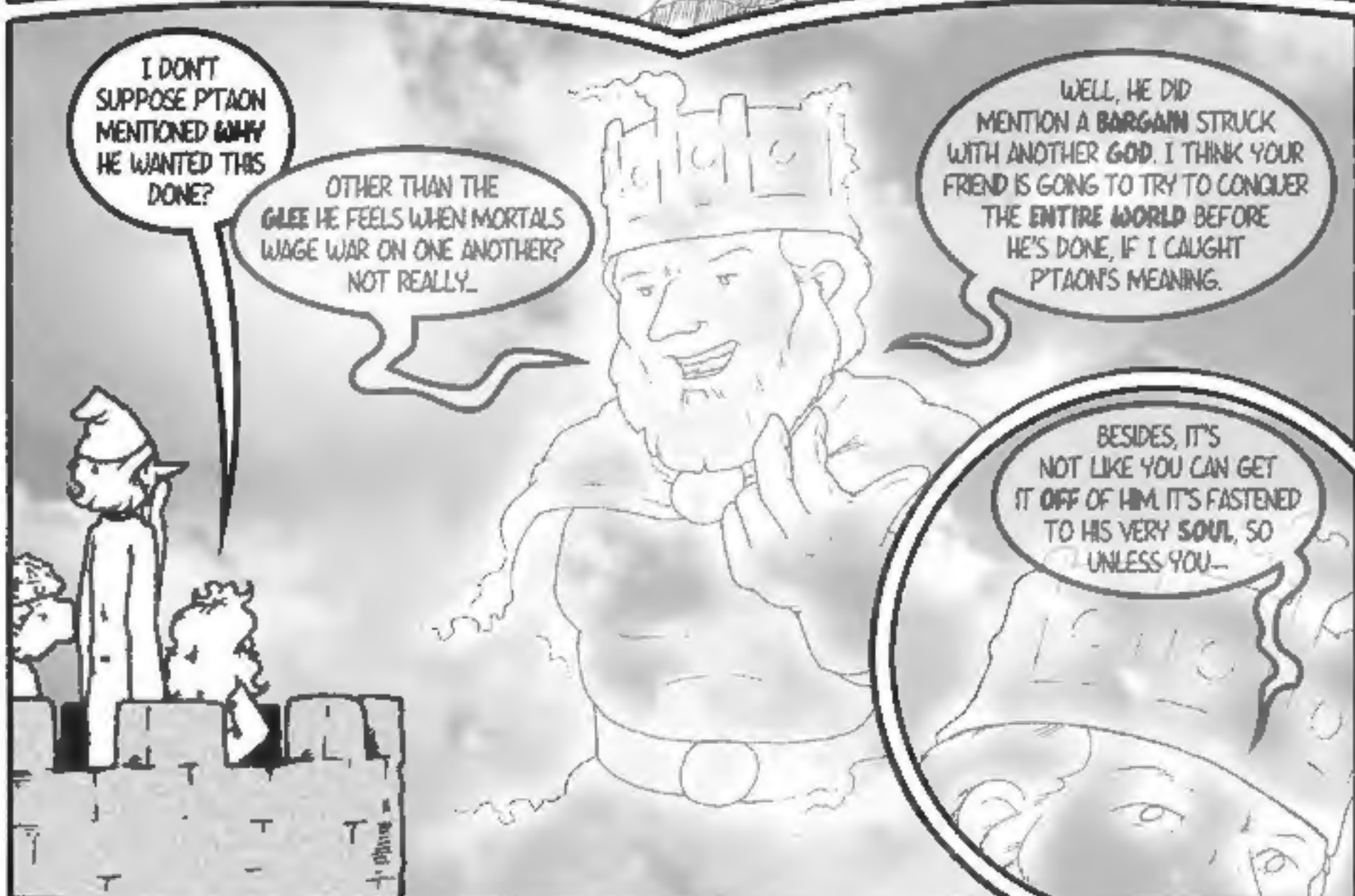
WHAT?! WHY DID YOU DO THIS TO HIM?



I WORSHIPPED P'TAON, ANCIENT GOD OF WAR.

IN EXCHANGE FOR AN ETERNITY OF GLORIOUS BATTLE, I WAS COMMANDED TO FIND THE MOST DESTRUCTIVE ONE IN THE LAND AND PUT THE GAUNTLET ON HIM.

SO I DID, AND SO I'M REWARDED.



I DON'T SUPPOSE P'TAON MENTIONED WHY HE WANTED THIS DONE?

OTHER THAN THE GLEE HE FEELS WHEN MORTALS WAGE WAR ON ONE ANOTHER? NOT REALLY.

WELL, HE DID MENTION A BARGAIN STRUCK WITH ANOTHER GOD. I THINK YOUR FRIEND IS GOING TO TRY TO CONQUER THE ENTIRE WORLD BEFORE HE'S DONE, IF I CAUGHT P'TAON'S MEANING.

BESIDES, IT'S NOT LIKE YOU CAN GET IT OFF OF HIM. IT'S FASTENED TO HIS VERY SOUL, SO UNLESS YOU—





Interlude:

# THE BROTHERHOOD OF EVIL HENCHMEN

AND THE MAP SAYS THAT THIS  
STONE HEAD IS ONLY A FEW LEAGUES FROM  
OUR TARGET. WE'RE ALMOST THERE!

WOULD YOU MIND  
READING THE WHOLE  
LETTER AGAIN?

SURE THING! "DEAR ADVENTURERS, PLEASE COME  
RAID THE CASTLE OF EVIL-BUT-RICH MONSTERS. WE WILL PAY  
YOU 10,000 GOLD PIECES WHEN YOU FINISH KILLING EVERYTHING  
AT THE CASTLE OF EVIL-BUT RICH MONSTERS. DON'T FORGET  
TO BRING YOUR HENCHMAN SO YOU CAN CARRY AWAY ALL THE  
MONEY YOU'RE GOING TO FIND."

DOESN'T THAT  
CASTLE NAME SOUND A LITTLE  
ODD TO YOU?

NOPE. "SO BRING  
YOUR HENCHMAN AND GET  
READY TO BE WEALTHY! THANK YOU  
FOR SAVING US FROM THE CASTLE  
OF EVIL-BUT-RICH MONSTERS.  
SIGNED, A NEARBY INNOCENT VILLAGE  
YOU'VE PROBABLY NEVER  
HEARD OF."

DOESN'T THE  
STRUCTURE OF THAT  
LETTER TELL YOU  
SOMETHING?

I'M  
WAY AHEAD  
OF YOU!


I THINK THE  
HANDWRITING IS BAD  
ENOUGH THAT I CAN ADD A  
FEW MORE ZEROS ON TO  
THAT REWARD TOTAL!

ARE YOU SURE  
HIS BRAIN ISN'T CURSED  
OR SOMETHING?

I'VE HAD A  
HARD TIME BELIEVING  
IT, MYSELF...








I TRUST MY  
MINIONS DID NOT TREAT  
YOU TOO ROUGHLY WHILE  
TRANSPORTING YOU HERE,  
DID THEY?

WHO--?




TELL ME,  
MASTER NODWICK: IS IT  
TRUE THAT YOU ONCE  
LIFTED AND MOVED THE  
GREAT OBELISK OF  
PIN-RE-SET FROM HIS  
DESERT TOMB?

WAS IT  
NOT YOU WHO  
BROUGHT THE  
COLOSSUS OF  
HEGEN-DAR TO  
OUR LANDS ON  
YOUR BACK?




WELL, YES, BUT  
NEITHER REALLY LOOKED GOOD  
ON THE LAWN, SO PIFFANY HAD ME  
LUG THEM TO THE CHILDREN'S  
MUSEUM--

I CARE NOT  
ABOUT YOUR LAND-  
SCAPING EFFORTS. WHAT  
DOES INTEREST ME IS YOUR  
SKILLS IN THE ART OF OBJECT  
TRANSPORTATION. YOU  
WILL SHARE THEM  
WITH US...




IN FACT, IF YOU ARE WISE,  
YOU WILL COME TO CALL THIS PLACE HOME.  
YOU WILL BECOME ONE OF US...

ONE OF THE  
BROTHERHOOD  
OF EVIL  
HEAVCHMEN!




NICE NAME.  
DO YOU GET A DECODER  
RING WITH THAT?

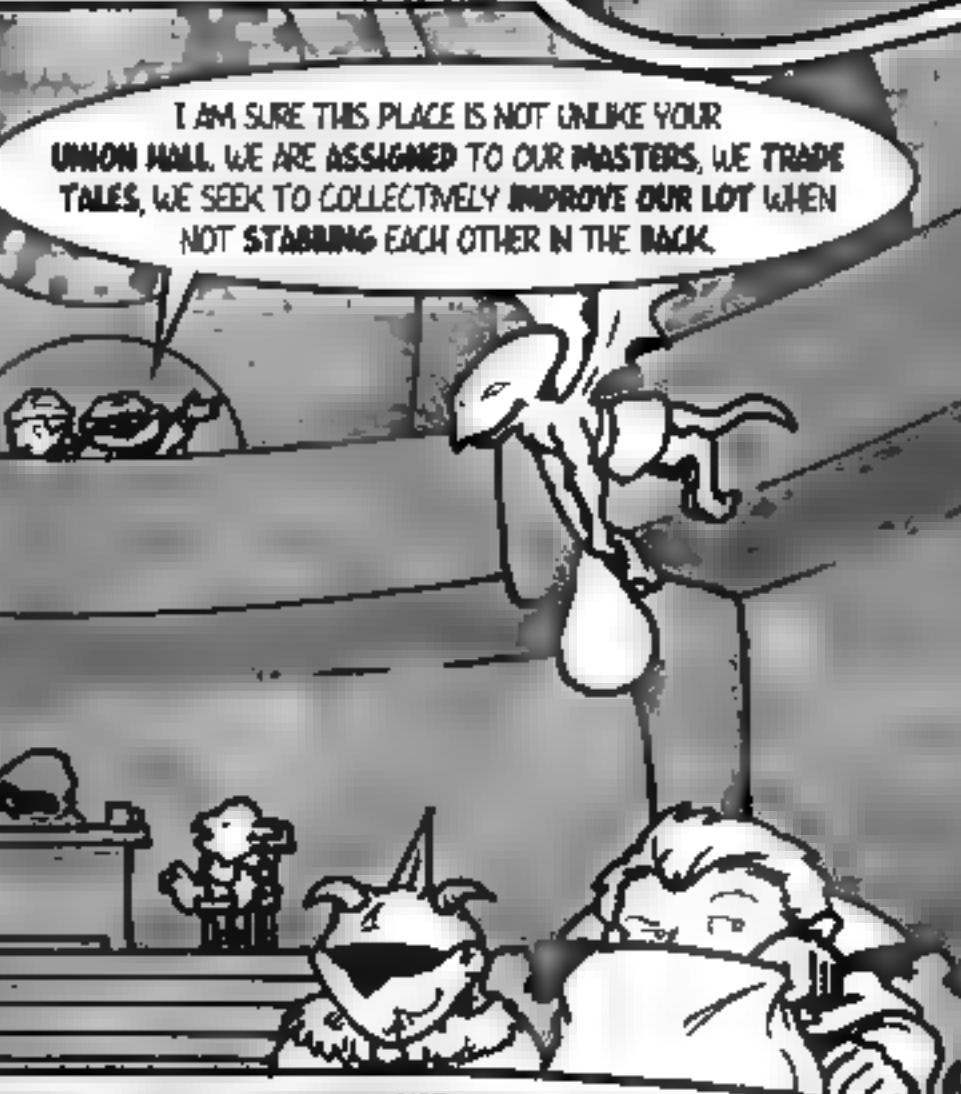
ONLY AFTER  
FIVE YEAR'S SERVICE I'M  
ONLY TWO MORE YEARS AWAY  
FROM A MONOGRAMMED  
GAROTTE!




COME. I HAVE MUCH  
TO SHOW YOU ABOUT OUR  
ORGANIZATION.



BEHOLD THE BROTHERHOOD!  
WE ARE A BAND OF HUMANS, HUMANIDS, AND  
OTHER MOSTLY ILL-SPIRITED RACES, BOUND TO  
SERVE THOSE WHO STRIVE TO BRING CHAOS AND  
WICKEDNESS TO THE WORLD.



I AM SURE THIS PLACE IS NOT UNLIKE YOUR  
UNION HALL. WE ARE ASSIGNED TO OUR MASTERS, WE TRADE  
TALES, WE SEEK TO COLLECTIVELY IMPROVE OUR LOT WHEN  
NOT STABBING EACH OTHER IN THE BACK.



WHEREAS YOU AND YOUR ilk ARE  
COMMITTED TO THE TRANSPORTATION OF  
BULKY ITEMS, OUR SPECIALTIES LIE MOSTLY IN  
THE PROCUREMENT OF RARE AND UNUSUAL  
ITEMS KEY IN DIABOLICAL PLANS.



WELCOME,  
STRANGER!  
BRAIN?

SOME OF US,  
HOWEVER, TEND TO GET IN  
A BIT OF A RUT.





NOW COME.  
WE HAVE MUCH  
TO LEARN FROM  
EACH OTHER.

I WANT  
TO SEE YOU  
LIFT IT.



THIS OBELISK WAS  
HEWN FROM THE HEARTSTONE OF A  
DEAD VOLCANO. IT TOOK HUNDREDS  
OF MEN TO BRING IT HERE.



I CAN'T JUST  
LIFT SOMETHING  
LIKE THAT!

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?  
SURELY YOU'VE HAD GREATER  
LOADS ON YOUR BACK...



BUT LIFTING THAT WOULD SURELY  
SNAP MY SPINE! IT MUST WEIGH AT LEAST FIVE  
TONS, AND YOU WANT ME TO TRY AND PICK IT UP?  
YOU'VE GOT TO BE JOKING.

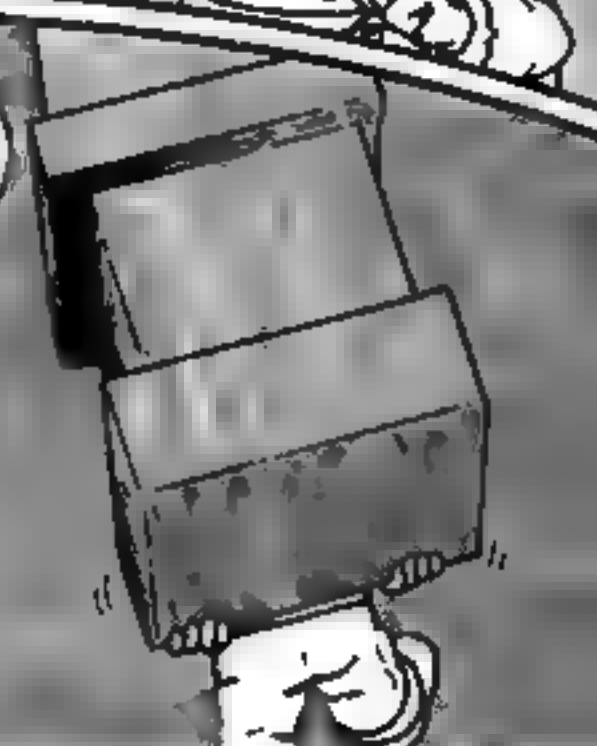



SAY, YOU DON'T THINK  
IT WOULD LOOK BETTER OVER AGAINST  
THE WALL, DO YOU?




HOW'S IT  
GOING?

I THINK I MIGHT  
HAVE UNCOVERED A RATHER  
BIZARRE SECRET ABOUT  
HOW THE UNIVERSE  
WORKS...






I CAN SEE THAT YOU HAVE MUCH TO TEACH US ABOUT THE WAYS OF TRANSPORTING THINGS. NOW, LET ME TELL YOU WHAT WE HAVE TO OFFER YOU.




OURS IS A WAY BASED ON PROCUREMENT. WHEN OUR MASTERS ASK US TO FETCH SOMETHING, ANYTHING, IF IT IS POSSIBLE, WE CAN GET IT.

BEOBOR, FOR EXAMPLE, HE WAS ASKED TO FETCH A BRAIN, AND THOUGH THERE IS MANY A SOUL FOR LEAGUES IN ANY DIRECTION, HE FOUND ONE.



IT WAS NOTHING, MASTER THEOBOR.

BY THE WAY, WHO ASKED YOU TO FETCH IT?



WHY, YOU DID.


WHAT? WHEN DID I DO THAT?



AFTER I SPILLED ORANGE JUICE ON YOUR CROSSWORD THIS MORNING, YOU SAID, "IF I HAD HALF A MIND..." WELL, THE REST OF IT WAS GARBLED, BUT I WENT OUT AND—

YES, YES. WE NEVER SAID THAT VERBAL NUANCE WAS ONE OF OUR STRONG SUITS.

HANG ON, YOU SAID HALF A MIND. WHY DID HE BRING BACK A WHOLE BRAIN?




FROM WHAT I COULD TELL, IT WASN'T DOING THE WORK OF AN ENTIRE BRAIN FOR ITS OWNER, SO I PLAYED IT SAFE.


A RELATIVE OF YOURS, WAS HE?

I'M THINKING OUR ORGANIZATIONS HAVE MORE IN COMMON THAN I'M COMFORTABLE WITH.







WELL, LOOK, THIS IS **FLATTERING** AND ALL, BUT I'M AFRAID I'M UNDER CONTRACT WITH THE HENCHMAN'S LOCAL. I COULDN'T JOIN YOU EVEN IF I **WANTED TO**.




THAT'S THE **BEAUTY** OF IT. IF YOU CAME OVER TO OUR SIDE, **CONTRACTS** WOULD HAVE NO HOLD OVER YOU. **BREAKING YOUR WORD** IS A **BENEFIT** OF WORKING WITH OUR ORGANIZATION.




**BENEFITS?** WHAT OTHER KINDS OF **BENEFITS** DO YOU GET?




OH, LET'S SEE... YOU GET TO ASSOCIATE WITH **POWERFUL A-TYPE PERSONALITIES**. YOUR SALARY CONSISTS OF ALL THE MONEY YOU CAN **SCROUNGE** FROM YOUR EMPLOYER'S **VICTIMS**. YOU GET TO **TORMENT PRISONERS** AND OTHERS BELOW YOU. THE LIST GOES ON. WHAT KIND OF **BENEFITS** DO YOU GET?



JUST ENOUGH PAY TO KEEP FROM **STARVING**. FREE TRAVEL TO **EXOTIC LANDS**. FAMILIARITY WITH **NON-HUMANOID BIOLOGY**, MOSTLY **DIGESTIVE SYSTEMS**. FREEDOM FROM THE **FEAR OF DYING**...



SOUNDS **LOVELY**. WHY WOULD YOU EVER WANT TO **QUIT**?



WELL, OF COURSE IT SOUNDS **BAD** WHEN YOU SAY IT LIKE **THAT**.



I GUESS I'VE JUST GOT TOO MUCH OF A SENSE OF DUTY TO BECOME AN EVIL HENCHMAN.

I'M INDEED SORRY TO HEAR THAT, I'M SURE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN EASIER IF WE DIDN'T HAVE TO RESORT TO UNPLEASANT MEANS TO LEARN YOUR HAULING TECHNIQUES.

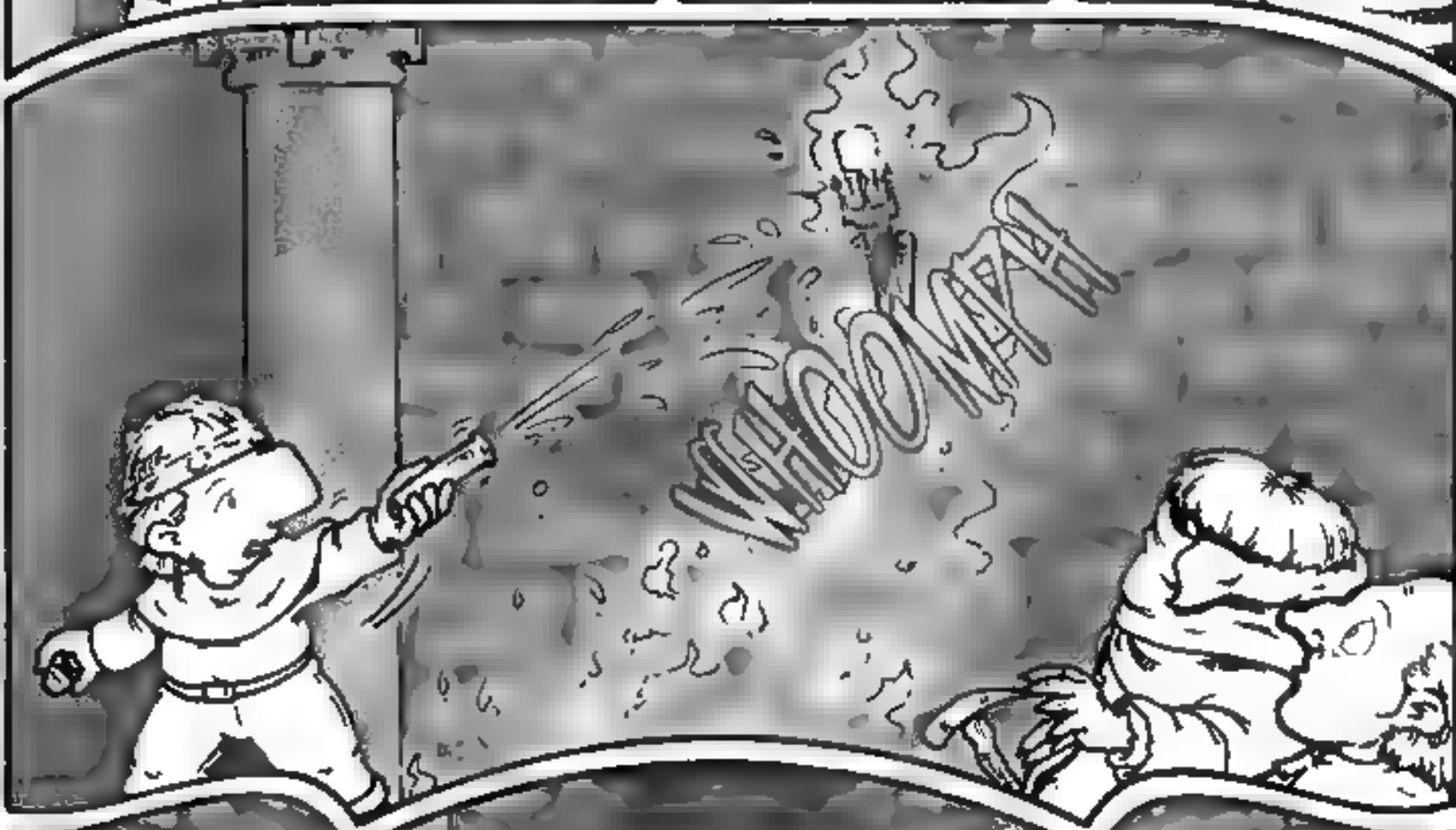


FOR YOU SEE, COMBINING OUR KNACK FOR FINDING ANYTHING WITH YOUR ABILITY TO LIFT IMMENSE WEIGHTS, OUR MASTERS WILL MAKE US INDISPENSABLE IN THEIR PLANS OF CONQUEST AND CHAOS! NOTHING THEY DESIRE WILL BE SAFE, BE IT A SCROLL, OR A WHOLE LIBRARY!



I FORGOT TO MENTION ONE OTHER BENEFIT. WE HAVE A HEALTH PLAN. IT COMES IN A VIAL AND IN A VARIETY OF FLAVORS, CHANGED MONTHLY. LAST MONTH WAS HEMLOCK—

I FAIL TO SEE WHY THAT'S SIGNIFICANT.



WOAH! THEIR HEALTH PLAN IS WAY MORE POTENT THAN OURS!

AS ARE THEIR MANAGERIAL POLICIES. I MUST REVISE OURS TO BE JUST AS WONDERFULLY DRACONIAN!









I'VE FINALLY FOUND THE EXIT! OF COURSE, I DON'T KNOW WHICH WAY LEADS HOME...

OOOHH, I'M IN SUCH A MOOD!



OH, HI.

NO MORE TRICKS! YOU AND I ARE SUPPOSED TO COME BACK TO THEOGOR. NO DELAYS, NO NOTHING!



OKAY. DUMP THE BRAIN AND LET'S GO.

WHAT? MY BRAIN?



HE SAID ONLY YOU AND I. THE BRAIN'S A THIRD WHEEL, DON'T YOU THINK?

BUT I'VE NEVER JUST LEFT A BRAIN BEFORE...



WELL, I COULD PUT IT BACK FOR YOU, IF I KNEW WHERE YOU GOT IT FROM...

WOULD YOU? I FOUND IT IN A HEAD OFF TO THE SOUTHWEST. I DON'T THINK YOU CAN MISS IT.



NO PROBLEM. I'LL MAKE SURE IT GETS THERE SAFE AND SOUND!



I'M LOOKING FOR SOMETHING NEW NOW: A REASON NOT TO HURT YOU FURTHER...

I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU'D LIKE ME TO GO FIND ONE FOR YOU?

OUR HERO HIKED FOR MILES, LOOKING FOR ANYTHING FAMILIAR.

SIGH. I'VE BEEN WALKING FOR HOURS, AND I'M STILL NO CLOSER TO KNOWING WHERE I AM.

YOU'RE QUITE THE CLEVER ONE, AREN'T YOU?

THEOGOR?  
HOW DID YOU GET OUT HERE?

NEVER MIND THAT. YOU'LL BE HAPPY TO KNOW THAT I CONSIDER YOU TOO MUCH TROUBLE TO BOTHER WITH.

UPON FURTHER REFLECTION, I'VE NOTED THAT YOUR UNION'S ABILITIES WOULD NOT BE PRACTICAL FOR THE SUBTLE NEEDS OF THE BROTHERHOOD'S EMPLOYERS. WHAT GOOD IS HAVING THE CONTENTS OF A WIZARD'S TOWER IF THE ENTIRE TOWER ALLOWS YOUR ENEMIES TO EASILY FIND YOUR LAIR?

PLUS, UNLESS YOU HENCHMEN COOPERATE WILLINGLY, YOU SEEM TO BE TOO DIFFICULT FOR THE BROTHERHOOD TO EFFECTIVELY RESTRAIN.

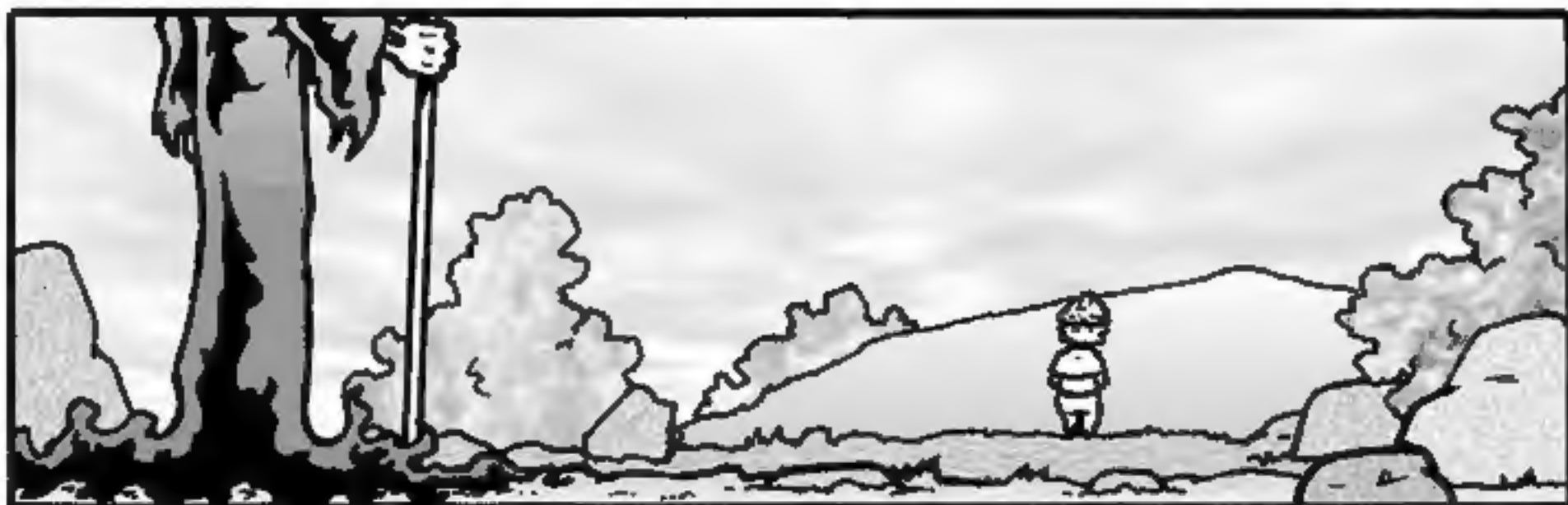
GOOD POINTS, I GUESS.

AND DON'T BOTHER TRYING TO CONVINCE ANYONE OF OUR EXISTENCE. THE PLACE YOU VISITED IS BUT ONE OF MANY, AND IT SHALL BE GONE BEFORE THE SUN SETS.

DON'T WORRY. I DON'T THINK I'D MIND NOT SEEING YOU AGAIN. NO OFFENSE.

NONE TAKEN. YOUR FRIENDS ARE SEARCHING FOR YOU. TWO OF THEM ARE JUST BEYOND THAT RISE.











HIS BRAIN  
HAD BEEN MISSING?  
IT'S ODD I DIDN'T  
NOTICE.

NOT  
REALLY.

ANYWAY, I  
NEVER USED IT, SO  
MY BACK DOOR  
SHOULD STILL BE  
THERE.



AND I TAKE IT  
WE'RE GOING TO EXPLOIT  
IT NOW?

I DON'T THINK WE  
HAVE A CHOICE. NODWICK?  
LOCK THE DOOR AND HOLD  
HANDS WITH US.



WHAT EXACTLY  
ARE WE DOING?

WE'RE GOING TO  
**SPRIT-WALK** DEEP INTO  
YEAGAR'S SOUL. ONCE THERE,  
WE'VE GOT TO TRY TO **FREE**  
HIM FROM THE **GAUNTLET**.  
THIS IS THE ONLY WAY I  
THINK WE CAN DO IT.

EVERYTHING  
THERE WILL SEEM **REAL**.  
AND IF WE AREN'T  
**CAREFUL**, WE MIGHT  
NOT COME BACK.

I'VE SET A  
**MAGIC BARD** TO  
PROTECT OUR  
BODIES WHILE  
WE'RE "AWAY."



THEN  
INTO THE ETHER  
WE GO!

To Be  
Continued...





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